

A BUNCH OF SYMPHONIC STIMULI As Marin Symphony Pursues Bold Paths

By Paul Hertelendy

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SAN RAFAEL---An ingratiating new piano concerto, an eloquent reading of Mahler, and an orchestra on a less-than-perfect night marked the Marin Symphony's second concert set of the season.

Getting its West Coast premiere, the Piano Concerto of New Yorker Kenji Bunch, 38, reminds me of a pet that you just bought, one that licks you and wants to hop up into your lap right away. The harmonies are as accessible as those of Rachmaninoff or Saint-Saëns, and the jazzy finale is Gershwin-esque and syncopated. Bunch's gift is in the shimmering sparks he brings to the orchestra, coming to life like some will-o'-the-wisp sprite, deftly perking up one's ear, at times with nothing more than a feathery pitter-pat. I don't for a minute see this as music for the ages, but rather as a bouquet that you welcome, inhale and enjoy. In the traditional repertory, the work standing closest to this one is Prokofieff's popular Third Concerto, though Bunch's is not as dependent on piano virtuosity. In fact, more than once the score (as heard Nov. 8) had us meandering leisurely, floating down rivers of sound, before the brass came to life and quickened the pulse.

This well-crafted concerto fit piano soloist Monica Ohuchi hand-in-glove, because of (or despite) Bunch and Ohuchi being husband and wife. She is uninhibited, with very good command of the instrument, bringing rhythmic freedom to the cadenza. I could see others doing this opus more assertively, but she is fluid and expressive, never just percussive.

Attractive solos were incorporated and played, on flute (Linda Lukas) and English horn (Laura Reynolds).

Music Director Alasdair Neale plays the demanding, hour-long Mahler First Symphony without a score before him, and it was obvious that this is a work very close to his heart. Some thought him crazy essaying the First in the wake of the S.F. Symphony's exemplary and informative video of it (on TV's "Keeping Score" series) earlier this year. But Neale brings some unique qualities to it, even though the mildly cantankerous winds and percussion on occasion have different ideas of the beat than he. In the slow sections, like the Funeral March (resembling "Three Blind Mice" played upside down), he does a taffy-pull on tempos, like the maestros of a century ago, probably much like Mahler himself. The rubato was emotional enough to make you melt, tugging at your very soul. And his finale comes in on little cat feet, then cuts loose in explosions of brass and timpani that made the floor vibrate underfoot.

This is a work laid out on a huge canvas---four trumpets, partly playing offstage, and eight French horns. The Marinites had 51 string players which, given the Mahler and the Marin Center Concert Hall, were not sufficient. Several fine-spun solos stood out, none better than the contrabass of Robert Ashley.

In this season of caution, deficits and conservative programming in performing arts, the Marin Symphony instead is a pioneer, with new or recent music by Liebermann, Pärt and Kapilow yet to come in a season of five concert sets ending May 8. Now, despite its 59 years, the Marin Symphony remains young, at times fallible, yet vibrant.

Marin Symphony, concerts through Nov. 8 at the Marin Center Concert Hall, San Rafael. For info: (415) 479-8100, or go [online](#).

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Paul Hertelendy has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish -- and a certain amount of salsa -- for years.

These critiques appearing weekly (or sometimes semi-weekly, but never weakly) will focus on dance and new musical creativity in performance, with forays into books (by authors of the region), theater and recordings by local artists as well.

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